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SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV and DRL/IRF

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SUBJECT: GVN'S RECENT ENGAGEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS, RELIGION ISSUES

1. (SBU) Summary: The Government of Vietnam is making some effort to engage the USG and other foreign governments more actively on human rights and religious freedom issues. European Union member diplomats spoke positively of the GVN's interaction in their human rights dialogue, and said it had produced a GVN commitment to hold two such dialogues per year in the future. The GVN has also tried to come up with a response to the questions and concerns Ambassador Hanford raised in his November visit, including religious prisoner lists. Two long-imprisoned Redemptrix priests may receive amnesties at the Vietnamese New Year in January 2004. End summary.

2. (SBU) Representatives of the Italian Embassy and European Commission in Hanoi told poloff that they were "pleased" with the GVN's interaction in the November 26 bilateral human rights dialogue. They said that a broad range of ministries attended the dialogue, all seemed well prepared, and that the tone of the meeting was "open and not defensive." The GVN gave the EU information on a list of prisoners of concern previously presented. (Note: The information was similar to that the GVN already provided to the USG. End note.) Though the EU could not point to concrete results attributable to the dialog, EU interlocutors were positive and said they saw it as a good base for successful interaction in the future. One tangible outcome is that the GVN agreed to hold dialogues twice per year with the EU - one involving the MFA alone, and one multi-ministry "plenary session." (Reftel A)

3. (SBU) The GVN also responded to Ambassador Hanford's suggestion that the GVN clearly reiterate to all levels of government its declared policy of respecting religious freedom. Le Hoai Trung, Deputy Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs International Relations Department informed visiting DRL officer Jean Geran on December 4 that the GVN "is seeking a way to do this, but it may not be in a specific, written memo due to political considerations." Trung also stated "we have taken measures to remind government officials of these laws," but provided no specifics.

4. (SBU) During a meeting with Ambassadors Hanford and Burghardt in Washington on December 5, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Van Bang provided a response to the list of religious prisoners and detainees Ambassador Hanford presented in November (Reftel B). In the response, the GVN states 20 of the 37 ethnic Ede detainees have been released, 6 are in prison, and 11 cannot be accounted for. (Note: Five of the 20 that have been released do not appear to be on the list Ambassador Hanford provided, though this may be due to confusion between birth names and patronymics. End note.) Of the 23 Hmong detainees on the original list, 8 have been released, and 2 are still being detained. The GVN provided no information on the other 13. Regarding the UBCV, the GVN claims Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do, and Thich Vien Dinh are "normally practicing religion in their pagodas," without reference to their house arrest-like conditions. Regarding the Catholic detainees from Ambassador Hanford's list, the GVN suggests that Pham Minh Tri and Nguyen Thien Phung (two Redemptrix priests serving 20 sentences since 1987) may receive amnesties at the Tet New Year holiday in January.

5. (SBU) Comment: It is likely that the ethnic minority prisoners were released (or perhaps never even formally charged) for reasons unrelated to our inquiries. The information on other detainees is similarly mixed: the statements about UBCV leaders are disingenuous, and the amnesties for the two Catholic priests - while welcome - would only shave the end off long prison terms. In this respect the GVN response is similar to the response it gave in August 2003 to the concerns we raised in connection with the U.S. Human Rights Dialogue (reftel C). There, too, the GVN took swift superficial action (including minor reduction in sentences for some prisoners) in response to our inquiries. Nonetheless, the quick and thorough response to Ambassador Hanford's inquiry can be taken as a further sign

that the GVN is wants to be perceived as addressing criticism on religious freedom issues and engaging the USG on the subject.  
BURGHARDT